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ABSTRACT

Mary Cassatt's paintings and graphics depict the world of 19th-century women, mothers, and children. Her exploration of intimate domestic life is informed by an unsurpassed ability to capture the natural, sometimes awkward poses of her figures and her refusal to "prettify" her subjects. This teaching guide gives an overview of Cassatt's life, art training, and travel in Europe. The guide provides information on the Impressionists and the historical and artistic context of a U.S. woman as a professional artist in the 19th century. It discusses Cassatt's approach to painting and describes one of her most famous paintings, "Little Girl in a Blue Armchair." The guide features illustrations of 15 of Mary Cassatt's paintings and graphics and suggests activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school. (BT)

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Mary Cassatt: Celebrating Everyday Life

A Guide for Teachers

Mary Cassatt, Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, 1878

SO 032 506

F. P. Smith

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Mary Cassatt: Celebrating Everyday Life

Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Eric Denker, Lecturer, Education Division, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
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Mary Cassatt: Celebrating Everyday Life

I admired Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I hated conventional art--I began to live.
--Mary Cassatt

Mary Cassatt's paintings and graphics depict the world of nineteenth-century women, mothers, and children. Her exploration of intimate domestic life is informed by an unsurpassed ability to capture the natural, sometimes awkward poses of her figures. She avoided appealing to sentimentality by refusing to "prettify" her subjects, instead employing natural expressions and un-idealized models. Little Girl in a Blue Armchair represents the characteristic restless posture of a child in an oversized, adult chair, captured in a composition that is remarkable for its brilliant color and striking design.

About the Artist

Mary Cassatt was born into an affluent family in Pennsylvania on May 22, 1844. She studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, one of the country's leading art schools. In addition to having regular exhibitions of European and American art, the faculty at the Academy encouraged students to study abroad. In 1865 Cassatt approached her parents with the idea of studying in Paris. Her father, a conservative banker, was not enthusiastic; he said he would almost rather see her dead. Despite their initial objections, Cassatt's parents relented and allowed her to go.

In Paris, Cassatt attended classes in the studios of the academic artists Jean Léon Gérôme and Thomas Couture. She also traveled extensively in Europe studying and copying old master paintings. In 1874 she settled permanently in Paris, where her work was regularly shown at the Salon, the annual government-sponsored exhibition. The following year she saw the pastel work of Edgar Degas, one of the leaders of the Impressionist movement, in a gallery window. Years later, Cassatt described the importance of this experience, "I used to go and flatten my nose against the window and absorb all I could of his art. It changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it."

The Impressionists

Degas first saw and admired Cassatt's work at the Salon, and in 1877 he invited her to join the Impressionists; she was the only American who ever exhibited in the avant-garde group's shows. She later explained the exhilaration of that moment. "At last I could work with absolute independence without considering the opinion of a jury. I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I hated conventional art--I began to live."

Degas and Cassatt became close friends and, although the relationship was sometimes volatile, the older artist's powerful influence can be observed in her choice of subjects and media. Cassatt's friendship, in turn, led Degas to explore subjects from the lives of

contemporary women such as images of milliners and shop girls. Cassatt had her first solo show in 1891 at the well-known Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris. Cassatt's failing eyesight caused her to abandon painting after 1911, but she continued to work hard to encourage the collecting and purchase of Impressionist paintings in America. The magnificent holdings of nineteenth-century French paintings in major American museums is due in no small part to her tireless efforts. By the time of her death in 1926, Mary Cassatt was acknowledged as one of the great American artists of the nineteenth century.

Historical and Artistic Context

Cassatt was one of a relatively small number of American women to become professional artists in the nineteenth century when most women, particularly wealthy ones, did not pursue a career. Her decision to study abroad reflects the strong character she displayed throughout her career. When Cassatt settled in Paris, an artistic revolution was already underway in France. Changes were occurring in the way that artists showed their work to the public, and in the freedom artists had to choose their own subjects and styles. Cassatt's career developed against the backdrop of these changes.

Contemporary Subjects

In the nineteenth century many artists were experimenting with subjects that formerly had been considered minor or unacceptable. Inspired by the realist imagery of painters Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet, and the writings of Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert, young artists rejected the conventional idea that serious painting had to illustrate a strong underlying moral or ethical theme. Instead they chose to record the world as they viewed it, depicting their surroundings and contemporary life in the city and countryside. Mary Cassatt's images of women and of children are a part of this broad movement in art and literature to represent aspects of everyday life in the second half of the nineteenth century.

A new approach to painting paralleled this emphasis on contemporary subjects. Academic artists had used a sober palette, with a variety of neutral and dark tones. They applied their paint in carefully blended brushstrokes that resulted in a widely-admired, smooth, enamel-like surface. The Impressionists believed that bright colors and broad, obvious brushstrokes were more appropriate in conveying the shimmering effects of outdoor light, and in capturing the immediacy of everyday life. Cassatt painted her early Salon submissions in the darker tones of the old masters, but under the influence of the Impressionists, her palette brightened noticeably.

Little Girl in a Blue Armchair

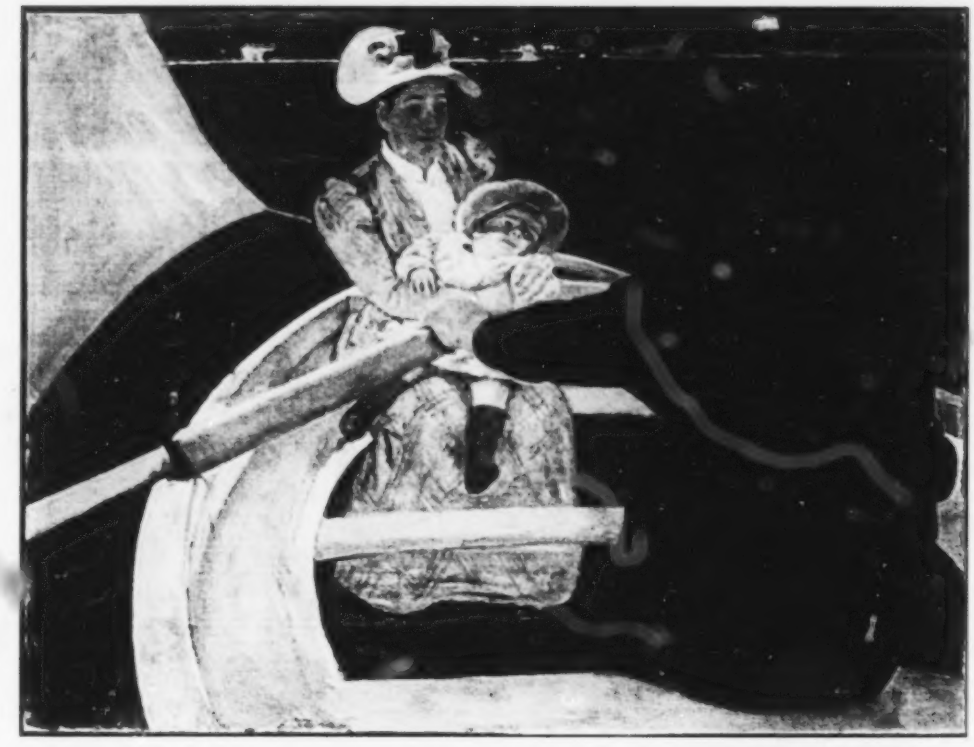
Cassatt painted this canvas shortly after she first came into contact with the Impressionists. In fact, Little Girl in a Blue Armchair may have appeared in the 1879 exhibition under the title Portrait of a Young Girl. The brilliant color and bold, loosely

handled brushstrokes are characteristic of her work at this time. Note the confident brushwork in the foreground chairs and in the little girl's outfit. Details of texture are not meticulously defined, but instead are suggested by the rapidly applied brushstrokes. The immediacy suggested by the handling of the surface is accentuated by the novelty of the composition.

The focus of the painting, the little girl, is placed daringly off-center. Cassatt's interest in Japanese woodblock prints is responsible for this asymmetric design as well as the strong two-dimensional surface patterns. Degas had introduced Cassatt to the exotic Japanese art that had begun to enter Paris in the 1860s. Many artists were influenced by the dramatic non-western perspective, strong colors, and arbitrary cropping found in the inexpensive woodblock prints. The impact of Asian art on nineteenth-century painting is evident in the way part of each chair is deliberately sheared off at the frame.

Degas himself played an active role in the evolution of this painting. As Cassatt later wrote to an art dealer, "It was the portrait of a child of a friend of Monsieur Degas. I had done the child in the armchair and he found it good and advised me on the background and he even worked on it." It is generally accepted that Degas painted the gray floor and windows, areas that differ in texture from the rest of the work.

Mary Cassatt: Celebrating Everyday Life



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Captions

1. The Boating Party, 1893/1894, oil on canvas, 1963.10.94
2. Children Playing on the Beach, 1884, oil on canvas, 1970.17.19
3. Child in a Straw Hat, c. 1886, oil on canvas, 1983.1.17
4. Girl Arranging Her Hair, 1886, oil on canvas, 1963.10.97
5. Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, 1878, oil on canvas, 1983.1.18
6. The Loge, 1882, oil on canvas, 1963.10.96
7. Miss Mary Ellison, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 1963.10.95
8. Mother and Child, c. 1905, oil on canvas, 1963.10.98
9. Portrait of an Elderly Lady, c. 1887, oil on canvas, 1963.10.7
10. Woman with a Red Zinnia, 1891, oil on canvas, 1963.10.99
11. Gathering Fruit, c. 1893, drypoint and aquatint in color, 1943.3.2757
12. In the Omnibus, 1890-1891, drypoint and aquatint on laid paper, 1963.10.250
13. The Letter, 1890-1891, drypoint and aquatint on laid paper, 1963.10.251
14. Portrait of the Artist's Mother, c. 1889, soft-ground etching and aquatint in light brown, yellow, and green, 1946.21.90
15. Woman Bathing, 1890-1891, drypoint and aquatint on laid paper, 1963.10.253

ACTIVITIES

Elementary

1. In a variation of the game charades, have a student sit silently in a chair and attempt to communicate an emotion using different facial expressions and poses. Encourage the students to try subtle emotions as well as the obvious ones of happiness, anger, or sadness.

2. Have everyone bring in a photograph or reproduction of a person sitting in a chair. Using L-shaped cardboard cutouts, frame the pictures in different ways to see how the composition changes.

3. Discuss how the painting is similar and different from a photograph.

Middle and High School

1. Identify and discuss contemporary women with distinguished careers. What prejudices did they overcome to achieve the status that they have today. Identify and discuss an important nineteenth-century American woman. What problems did she face in pursuing her goals? What problems remain to be addressed in the equal treatment of the sexes before the law and in society?

2. Get a book or catalog with reproductions of Cassatt's works. Is there anything uniquely feminine about her work? Can art be identified as masculine or feminine simply by appearance? Look at the work (or reproductions) of a twentieth-century American woman artist, and consider the same issues.

3. Research and discuss the artistic environment in Paris in the 1860s and 1870s. Discuss the conservative attitudes to art in that period, and what parallels they may have to the artistic environment in the United States today.

Resources

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